

Heroes and heroism in renaissance literature assignment

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The social climate of a time and the associated values and norms will determine how characters are presented as a hero and how others are not. This paper will analyse how heroes are portrayed and how heroism is defined in Renaissance literature. To do so, we will have to look back at two literary periods which influenced the Renaissance significantly, namely the classical epics and poems, and medieval literature. This is necessary as it is impossible to analyse a literary movement without acknowledging its predecessors because art movements are often a reaction to its forerunners.

The classical epics, poems, narratives and plays were essential in Ancient Greece and Rome. They were the main source of entertainment and were used to educate the people in these polytheistic societies. The hero in these texts were typically from noble and wealthy descent and they were sometimes portrayed as god-like characters. During these times, people valued ideals such as courage, honor, the warrior code and the importance of preserving the family “good name”. For example, epic heroes will not take on a fight with a weaker foe and he will respect the honorable heroic code.

The characterization and portrayal of the heroes were done in a stereotypical way. A possible reason for this could be the fact that these stories were part of the oral tradition of telling stories which means that events, characters and plots needed to be relatively simple and easy to remember. A typical protagonist would try to achieve a goal, but would not succeed and was likely to die in the process of trying to achieve it. He or she had one main, tragic flaw which would be his downfall and therefore would lead the hero to a tragic death.

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As his unlucky fate approaches, the hero will often have a lengthy lamentation where the character reflects on his unfortunate fate, sorrow existence, unjust times and the will of the gods. Examples of these tragic, epic heroes can be found in tragedy plays by classical playwrights such as Sophocles and Euripides and authors such as Virgil and Homer. Characters like Oedipus, Odysseus and Antigone are typical tragic heroes. For example, Antigone's tragic flaw is her pride and her unwillingness to accept the rules of the King.

She is a good example of a character whose tragic story turned out to be very influential to future authors. As the Classical Era came to an end, new values from the Middle Ages were gradually making their way into literature. The culture was undergoing a change as Christianity came more prominent in society. This religious change had a significant impact on social rules and values and this had a long-lasting influence on literature. Due to the high degree of illiteracy, people relied on monks and other members of the church to write down stories.

Coincidentally, there were a lot of religious overtones in medieval texts. Early medieval poems such as Beowulf can be seen as transitional texts because both heathen values such as revenge, and some Christian elements such as grieve, are present in the text. Heroes in these early medieval texts could still be noninsured to be epic heroes, they share similar values and norms, but they are no longer noblemen by definition. " The epic heroes are simple men, versed in the activities of common life. They are leaders not through class status or wealth or even birth, but through the excellencies of heart

and mind and hands. (Norman, 27-28) Marshall Fishwife points out that there is a change in style when it comes to the values that defined the medieval hero (10). In the late medieval romances (such *Tristan and Soled*) special attention is paid to social, religious and moral codes. The hero wants to be successful on the battlefield but attaches importance to correct behavior at court as well, along with loyalty towards his lord, reverence for women and values such as temperance. Thus, the chivalric hero was born.

The transition from the epic hero to the chivalric hero with Christian undertones did not happen overnight, and although they share similarities and values, they are also significantly different. The epic hero will often have to go through a physical combat to win his fight, a chivalric hero undergoes a moral, spiritual combat where he has to accept his “ward” or fate. The characterization of these heroes is quite similar to the heroes from the classical era. Although the character has flaws and needs to overcome them by going on a quest, the character is still quite medallion’s.

The hero is rather generic in that his values are shared by most other heroes from that time. Main characters in medieval times are often easily put in the category “good” or “bad”, and the hero is by definition one of “good guys”. Examples of medieval heroes are Roland in the *Song of Roland*, Gain in *Sir Gain and the Green Knight* and Tristan in *Tristan and Soled*. In the 14th century the Renaissance started to spread throughout Europe and it changed the way people and artists approached history and art.

English literature started to undergo a shift in a new direction in the 15th century as writers rediscovered their predecessors from the classical era

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along with their humanistic views on reality. The Renaissance was a pivotal period in the development towards the more individualistic and humanistic society that we know today. Renaissance literature is at the same time a mixture of different elements from previous literary movements and a reaction against those movements. Much like artists from other art disciplines, authors from that period looked back at great artists from the classical times in Ancient Rome and Greece.

They had a great respect for their themes, characters and literary formats such as epic narratives, poems and tragedy plays, and many of these aspects were mimicked or adapted by Renaissance writers. M. A. Did Cesar states in his article “ Not less but more heroic: The epic task and the Renaissance hero” that “ heirs and rebels both, the Renaissance epic poets created formidable and interesting heroes. (...) They modified the tradition inconsiderably, liking their poet-figures to their heroes, pulling back from the excesses of heroic energy, internalizing heroism, yet seeking to scale new heights. (69) This shows that Renaissance writers were giving a social commentary about their own society by linking it back to classic literature and by commenting on medieval values. The religious undertones from medieval literature did not disappear completely because religion and Christianity were still an important element of society. But, the Renaissance author did start to incorporate humanistic ideals and values in his texts. These new values were occasionally in contrast with the Christian values and this resulted into interesting, complex characters.

Heroes in Renaissance literature can be noblemen, but they do not have to be by definition. A mixture of classical values such as courage and honor with medieval values like chivalry, endurance and patience became the norm and this introduced new views on heroism. The characterization of heroes became much more complex, process driven and realistic. Authors were no longer afraid of having a complex hero with contradictory characteristics and strange motives. The “ good” versus “ bad” profiles became more nuanced and the rise of humanism can be seen as a cause for this.

Both epic literature and medieval texts have heroes who are rather straightforward and not that complex in their characterization, but people in the Early Modern times were interested in the minds of individuals, not the generic ideals of a stereotypical hero. To illustrate the influence of classical and medieval heroes on Renaissance heroes, we will look at several examples where these influences and changes in social climate, values and characterization can be perceived. As a first example we will turn to the man who is often considered to be the guarded of English Renaissance literature and theatre, William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare has many different kinds of heroes, which forms a challenge for the reader or audience to define which characters are the true heroes and which ones are not. Henry IV part 1 has an interesting historical context as it deals with the rise of the house of Lancaster, which happened 3 approximately two centuries prior to Shakespearean time. The bard sets his play in this setting for it allows him to give a social commentary on the social

and political situation of his time without offending any people in particular. When it comes to the hero of the play, it gets a little tricky.

There are several possible heroes in the play who are all heroes in their own way. First of all, there is the character of Hotshot. He could be considered a thriving hero by classical, epic standards as he lives an ambitious life and strives towards glory and honor. But it is his obsession with honor and glory that will lead him to his death. This makes him a tragic character instead of a thriving, successful character. Falstaff is another complex character in the sense that his relationship with Hal changes drastically during the play.

At first he is seen as the character who brings comic relief to the play and who is the exact opposite of Hotshot. Where Hotshot is trying to achieve glory and honor, Falstaff doubts the very relevance of honor. Shakespeare is “deeply ambivalent about the very possibility of heroism in the political worlds their texts portray.” (Lawrence 5). Falstaff challenges the meaning and relevance of honor: Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery then?

No. What is honor? A word. What is that word honor? Air. (V. I. 130-134) This is contrasting the whole idea of honorable and heroic values in the epic and medieval literary tradition, which can either make Falstaff an anti-hero, or a new kind of hero. Even though he is selfish, lazy, dishonest, corrupt and unclean, he is a self-made man. He creates the myth of “Falstaff” through his witty usage of language. As language and puns are very important in

Shakespearean plays, one could argue that he is a new kind of hero.

However, when Hal becomes King, their relationship changes.

Falstaff is humiliated by Harry and he even gets disowned, these series of vents turn him into a tragic hero. The real, successful hero in the play is Hal who is intelligent, witty and pragmatic. But even Hal is a complicated hero in Henry IV part 1; during the battle of Shrubbery he is seen as a warrior hero who is confident and a “ true prince” of England. However, as the audience gets to know Hal, the audience realizes that he is not fond of life at court. He likes to mingle with the “ simple” men on the street and to get to know them better.

He befriends the lazy and unclean Falstaff and to an extent, adopts the simple way of life. But his motives are shrewd; he does this to lower other people’s expectations of him in order to emerge as a real hero when the situation comes for him to step up and be a leader. In a way, he is a self-made man as well; even though he is born in a noble family, he decides to use his own intelligence and analytical skills instead of his inherited nobility to gain people’s loyalty. Important values attached to heroism are intelligence, self-creation and most importantly, honor.

Hotshot idealizes it, Falstaff despises it, but Hal’s view on honor is less extreme. He recognizes its significance and power, but sees that it is not the only ideal to live his life by. He is willing to set aside his honor by befriending Falstaff and other odd characters to win their trust and to become more successful in the end. Did Cesar confirms the idea of Hal as a hero: “

Shakespearean plausible transmutation of epic, the Henries, the emerging

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heroic figure is not the single-minded Hotshot, who would pluck honor from the pale-faced moon, but the more restrained prince Hal. (69) Shakespeare shows that a hero is no longer the straight-forward, “good” person going on a quest and this is emphasized by other authors of Renaissance literature as well: the character of Doctor Faustus in Marlowe *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* is a person from a high social class and he is an egoistic, foolish and selfish person, but he is also a humanist. So the reader gets a more complex character representation of the hero. Similarly, Milton’s characterization of Satan in *Paradise Lost* makes Satan a compelling character because of his ability to overcome his weakness and doubts to achieve his goal.

Adam and Eve can be seen as potential “moral” heroes, but they are not as clear-cut as moral heroes from classical or medieval literature. They are not perfect and their curiosity and vanity are their weaknesses. M. A. Did Cesar says: “Milton was by no means the first to think that the tradition was really a challenge.” (58) He means that Milton was one of the authors who looked back at epic literature and adapted the conventions to a new time, a new social climate. He found a new kind of heroism within the tradition of heroes from the past. His characters are flawed, but in a more realistic way than before.

Another interesting hero in the tradition of renaissance literature is Ironwork in Ben Jonson’s *Ironwork; The Royal Slave, A True History*. This early modern hero is important with regard to the social climate of the time where slave trading was still heavily practiced. Ben Jonson introduces a new kind of hero and

discusses social issues such as gender, slavery, feminism, individualism, race and religion. The hero, Ironwork, is a very ambivalent and complex character who is defined by many contradictions. He is a prince and slave trader which makes him a hero of noble descent, but he becomes a slave during the story.

This means he is a prince and a slave at the same time. He is a nobleman and a rebel, aggressive and passive, a warrior and a domestic husband. Furthermore, he is a non-Christian character, but is represented in a Christ-like way. Ironwork is powerful and powerless and this makes him interesting and appealing to the audience (and to the narrator). The narrator describes him with romantic language and by strangely enough, European standards. He does not seem to be like the other slaves as he has different physical characteristics, he is educated, knows many languages, etc. His face was not of that brown rusty black which most of that nation are, but of perfect ebony, or polished Jet. (...) His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole proportion and air of his face was so nobly and exactly formed that, bating his color, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome. " (1139) Ironwork is described as if he were a white and European character.

This description can be linked to the status of heroes in epic literature where they were considered nobles and even semi-gods. This is reinforced when he is slaying the tigers and the romantic image of him being a prince in

captivity. He embodies values from epic literature such as courage, physical strength and honor, as well as medieval ideals with respect to chivalry and (pain) endurance. One could argue that Ironwork is two kinds of heroes: the first being Ironwork as a warrior-hero in his African home, the second being Ironwork as a slave in Saurian where he becomes a hero for his endurance and patience.

Other elements that make Ironwork a hero are his promise to Indiana that he will never marry another woman because “ her soul would always be fine, and always young. ” (1140) and his respects toward her as an equal.

Furthermore, he despises the British plantation owners and slave traders because they have no honor. He is, however, not a pacifist. He participates in war and takes 150 slaves in captivity to gift to Indiana as a symbol of his love. He considers war to be an honorable way of conquering and this is similar to epic and early-medieval heroes.

This makes him a good blend of an epic and chivalric hero. Mary B. Rose describes this new kind of heroism in the following statement: “ Ironwork conjuncts the feminine subject position with slavery and compromised agency and presents the combination as the defining condition of heroism, multitudinously idealizing and scrutinizing the heroics of endurance. ” (100)

6 These examples show that the hero in Renaissance literature is characterized by the mixture of classical, medieval and humanistic ideals.

The rise of individualism and humanism made the characters more complex and profiled them as individuals and less as generic, stereotypical heroes.

This analysis of heroes in Renaissance literature shows that the political,

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social and religious contexts can never be underestimated when analyzing literature and that one should always pay attention to preceding tertiary movements when discussing a particular period because it helps us to place a literary work in the right time-frame. Works cited: Been, Para. Ironwork; The Royal Slave.